

THE ROAD RARELY TAKEN: XANDER BOGAERTS' UNUSUAL PATH FROM ARUBA TO THE BIG LEAGUES

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Xander Bogaerts is on a rarely traveled path from Aruba to the big leagues. (AP)

Xander Bogaerts and his twin brother, **Jair**, got their first looks at baseball from a stroller, when their uncle **Glenroy Brown** often brought them to the Little League field where he coached in San Nicolaas, Aruba.

The twins didn't grow up in a well-known baseball hotbed like the Dominican Republic, nor did they play in youth leagues as competitive as those that exist in the United States. But they were born on an island that's enjoyed baseball since long before they were born, even though that part of the Caribbean has only recently drawn increased attention from American baseball fans.

"I think if you're scouting in Curacao or Aruba for the first time, you would think that baseball has always been one of the main sports of the islands," said Red Sox international scouting director **Eddie Romero**. "They have such a passion about it. It's a very animated atmosphere. The fans are very into it, each team has its chance, and it's something similar to a college football atmosphere here in the States."

Neighboring Curacao has been well represented in the majors of late by players like the Rangers' **Jurickson Profar**. Now Bogaerts, who was called up to the Red Sox on Aug. 19, has the chance to become Aruba's first true major league star.

Bogaerts is the fifth player from Aruba to make it to the majors (13 from Curacao have done it). The longest-tenured of those was **Sidney Ponson**, a pitcher who was signed by the Orioles in 1993 and debuted as a 21-year-old in 1998. He played for seven teams over 12 years, retiring with a 5.03 career ERA.

Andruw Jones was also signed out of Curacao as a 16-year-old in 1993. Consequently, Bogaerts grew up watching the Braves and rooting for a local player.

“We had Andruw Jones back then with the Braves, so we saw him all the time,” Bogaerts said. “We had Sidney Ponson, a pitcher from Aruba. He was with the Yankees and Orioles, so we saw him all the time. But mostly it was the Atlanta Braves with Andruw Jones.”

For MLB scouting purposes, Aruba and Curacao, a pair of islands about 20 miles off the coast of Venezuela, generally are grouped together. Both are constituent countries of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and their official languages are Dutch and a creole language called Papamintio, although English is widely spoken and taught in schools.

Curacao is the larger of the two, with a population of about 145,000. It’s also produced better-known baseball names, beginning with Jones and, more recently, Profar, the Braves’ **Andrelton Simmons** and the Diamondbacks’ **Didi Gregorius**, who was born in Amsterdam but grew up in Curacao. Dodgers pitcher **Kenley Jansen**, one of the NL’s best relievers, also is from Curacao.

The Lago Oil and Transport Company brought American and Dominican workers, among others, to Aruba in the first half of the 20th century. Those workers helped introduce baseball to Aruba by building a sports complex near the refinery. While soccer was and remains more popular on the island, the complex also held a baseball field, where many of Aruba’s young players still compete today. Proximity to Venezuela, which has produced 296 major league players, also fueled the game’s growth in both Aruba and Curacao.

Bogaerts says he isn’t especially surprised by the recent wave of players from the Dutch Caribbean in North American professional baseball. He’s just surprised it didn’t happen sooner.

“I have a few uncles that, if we had scouts go to Aruba in their time, they’d probably be ... I don’t know about major league players, but they’d probably sign a pro contract,” Bogaerts said. “Lately, it’s just the more exposure we had to the other islands, the scouts go and see the tournaments and stuff. That’s where the scouts pick up on players, and then they go back to Aruba and do tryouts and stuff. But I definitely bet if they had scouts back in my uncles’ time, things would be different.”

Brown, who played only a few years of organized baseball as a teenager, says he wasn’t one of those uncles who had a chance to go pro, although he does remember scouts starting to visit Aruba occasionally in the 1970s. He has, however, been a baseball fan and a Cardinals devotee since listening to the 1967 World Series on the radio and choosing **Bob Gibson** as his favorite player.

“I had a cousin who used to order The Sporting News from the States, and you’d see the pitchers – I was a National League [fan],” Brown said. “Up to today, I don’t believe in the designated hitter rule like they use in the American League.”

Brown didn’t get the chance to start playing organized ball at a young age – he describes his baseball experience as beginning “in our backyard, throwing a tennis ball against a wall and swinging a broomstick.”

However, he began coaching Little League soon after he stopped playing and still coaches to this day. He says that while interest in baseball has generally increased among kids in Aruba, a lack of leadership and dedicated coaches sometimes prevents the local leagues from fielding as many competitive teams as they could.

While he's worked with more than 30 years' worth of young players, Brown spent the most time with Xander and Jair, teaching them the fundamentals in the backyard even after he worked long days at a nearby Sheraton hotel.

"When they were something like 6½, 7 years old is when I started to [teach] them how to throw a ball and catch a ball," Brown said. "With toys, with a plastic bat and a ball that was like a Wiffle ball. And that's the way they began to get knowledge of the game, and then they kind of liked it."

The boys got involved in Little League around that time, and Bogaerts began traveling around the Caribbean to play in tournaments when he was 9 years old. That gave him a chance to experience the game in countries with more intense relationships with baseball, and he enjoyed the heightened level of competition.

"You play against teams that want to win," Bogaerts said. "Curacao, Puerto Rico, Saint Thomas, all those Latin American countries, and all of them want to go win a championship, so it was pretty competitive, really nice."

The level of competition in Aruba may lag behind some of its Caribbean neighbors, but the island did send a team to represent the Caribbean in the Little League World Series as recently as 2011. Curacao has had even more success in the Little League World Series, winning the tournament in 2004 and winning the Caribbean region every year from 2001 to 2009.

The Bogaerts family moved to Bonaire, a smaller island east of Curacao, when the boys were 11. But they eventually moved back to Aruba, first Jair and then Xander, largely because the quality of baseball was higher there.

Although they're the same age, Bogaerts says he looked up to Profar, as well as **Jonathan Schoop**, an infielder from Curacao in the Orioles' system, when he was growing up. He says the generation behind him is doing the same.

"With all the names of those guys coming out and close to the majors, and some of them are in the majors already, it's just increasing the level of interest over there. It's crazy," Bogaerts said. "I imagine a lot of scouts go down there now, more than in my time."

The fact that Bogaerts can separate his "time," just four years ago, from the present highlights the ongoing growth of baseball in the islands. Romero said the scouting presence there has increased accordingly. The Sox now employ a full-time scout who covers both islands.

"I know even in the last three or four years, it's grown exponentially," Romero said. "You take into account the talent of players like Profar and Xander, Andrelton Simmons, guys that are

coming out of there, there's a lot of talent that's being produced out of there. Wherever there's talent being produced, teams are going to pay attention to that."

While the major league spotlight has only shone on the islands within the last 20 years or so, Brown says he remembers MLB having a presence in Aruba as early as the late 1960s. He recalls a Dominican coach from the Montreal Expos who came to train an Aruban All-Star team in the late '60s, as well as a handful of players who signed pro contracts in the '70s and '80s but never made it to the majors.

There are a few clear obstacles to Aruba becoming a baseball hotbed on par with somewhere like the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. First of all, it's significantly smaller, with a population of about 101,000. For comparison, there are about 10 million people in the Dominican and about 3.7 million in Puerto Rico.

Even in Curacao, more comparable in size, Brown says youth baseball is more intense and competitive than in Aruba. He suggests that the economic differences between Aruba and other Caribbean countries might partially explain the difference in their attitudes toward professional baseball.

"Some of the kids out there, maybe their life is so comfortable at home, if they push them too hard and [the kids] don't want to, maybe they shrug their shoulders and they come back to Aruba," Brown said. "They're going to eat anyhow, while the guys from the Dominican Republic who come from a harder time, they press a little harder."

That clearly wasn't the case for Bogaerts, who was signed at 16 and rose through the Red Sox' system to the majors before his 21st birthday. He's benefited from a combination of motivation and athleticism that's rare in any country, along with at least one distinct aspect of his Aruban upbringing: He speaks English and Spanish as well as Aruba's two official languages, Dutch and Papaminto. That's eased his transition to the United States, and helped him ease others' as well.

"I think that's a huge advantage, when you're at that age and you can communicate with every teammate that you have," Romero said. "Most of our guys that sign out of Aruba or Curacao, and most of the other teams' as well, they'll send them straight to the Dominican Summer League to start developing their careers. Once you get there, and you can right away communicate directly with not only your Spanish-speaking teammates, but also your English-speaking rovers, roving instructors that come in from the States — you can understand them. And then once you move your development into the States, in that process, you have no problem assimilating."

"Guys like Xander have always served as kind of intermediaries between the Latin players and the English players. Why? Because he's bilingual and he's a very intelligent kid, he can communicate directly with the coaches and not miss anything in translation. It's a huge advantage for somebody like Xander. He's always been very mature and helpful, in addition to that, so he's been a tremendous help to a lot of players in the system."

Romero says Aruba and Curacao boast plenty of athletic, if unrefined, players in their youth leagues, and that Caribbean tournaments have played a huge role in giving those players a wider audience.

“As an international scout, you try to cover all those tournaments,” Romero said. “There’s no evaluation tool like seeing players in the game. You can see not only his tools, but how he interacts with his teammates, what his work ethic is before the game, what his desire is, is he a clutch player who likes to hit in the important times of the game. And seeing those players in a game environment really allows you to properly evaluate all areas of the player’s game.”

Bogaerts’ ascent to the majors could help bring even more scouting attention to Aruba, continuing to shape the way young players approach the game there. As Little Leaguers in the islands once tuned in to watch Andruw Jones, so they now may follow Bogaerts’ career. Even Brown, the avowed National Leaguer, has donned a metaphorical Red Sox cap, one of many new Boston supporters in a country 2,000 miles from Fenway Park.

“I watched the Red Sox even before Xander got there, once he signed with the organization,” Brown said. “Not only me – the rest of the family included. Right now, Aruba has got a lot more Boston fans. Aruba had a lot of Yankee fans and they had a few of the Orioles when Ponson was with the Orioles. But right now, a lot of hearts have gone to Boston.”

An earlier version of this post stated that English was an official language in Curacao, which is incorrect, although English is widely spoken in both Curacao and Aruba.

Source : <http://fullcount.weei.com/sports/boston/baseball/red-sox/2013/08/27/the-road-rarely-taken-xander-bogaerts-unusual-path-from-aruba-to-the-big-leagues/>